

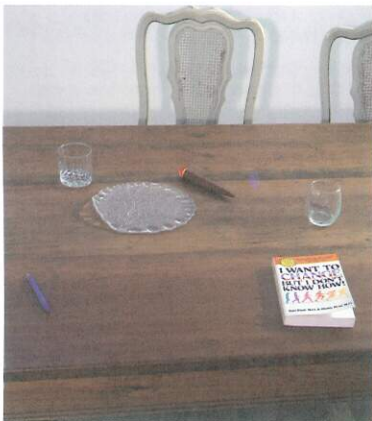
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## Lee Kit: Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?)

Western Front, Vancouver

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In *Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?)*, a recent exhibition by Hong Kong-based Lee Kit at the Western Front, Vancouver, the artist assembled a tableau of carefully selected household articles and original artworks to effect a domestic space for an absent subject. The subject in this case is Henry, a fictional character based in part on an unpopular Hong Kong politician. Working from a handful of known events and facts, Lee Kit imagines Henry as a uniformly misanthropic character. His characterization is of one born into a position of privilege who, ill-prepared or ill-suited to use his influence, drifts through life and political posts carelessly. Lee Kit imagines the character of Henry not as a young *bon vivant* with ample time to plan his life, but, rather, in later years, isolated by self-interest, pacing the days of a life drained of purpose and direction.



It is unclear whether Lee Kit intends this portrayal as a criticism of the public figure in question or if this person simply proved to be a useful model. In any event, the character provides the impetus for the construction of a peculiar *mise-en-scène*. The space is furnished with pieces from a number of eras, a perhaps once-grand dining table, faux-fine chairs with “distressed”

Left and opposite page: Lee Kit, *Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?)*, installation view, 2011. Photo: Kevin Schmidt. Courtesy of the artist and Western Front, Vancouver.

paint and worn brocade seats, a mid-century credenza with a bachelor’s odd assortment of everyday dishes and serving pieces, and a small end table. Collectively, these give the impression of a deconstructed space, a domestic ruin, or another space that reads as permanently temporary. Half-finished projects, a chair rail that peters out, ending abruptly in the middle of the wall, reinforce this sense, as do crude light fixtures—a 1980s wall sconce and wall-mounted fluorescent tubes, the kind that may cause dental cavities and are typically found on the ceilings of public buildings of a certain era. Also of interest are the items on the table: an ad hoc minimalist haberdashery of emptied glass, platter, pen, some tchotchke, and a self-help book titled *I Want to Change But I Don’t Know How* that has on its cover a silhouette of a man running with a rainbow radiating in his wake. The side table supports an empty vase and a small television set that shows a video of a swaying





Opposite page: Lee Kit, *Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?)*, installation view, 2011. Photo: Kevin Schmidt. Courtesy of the artist and Western Front, Vancouver.

electric fan exactly like the wall-mounted fan hung above. These sparse contents provide us with clues to Henry's disposition and mental state, and, like the painted fabric cloths Lee has become known for, can be touched, picked up, used, moved, and otherwise put into motion.

His striped and plaid fabrics are works unto themselves, but the artist has also emphasized their use value, encouraging and building utility into their presentation. Cloths are sat, stood, and slept on; they accompany eating, drinking, and smoking and are used for cleaning, washing, and waving. The artist produced three new painted cloths for this exhibition, a small blue striped cloth that was laid over the radiator and used on occasion to dust. A larger piece with what appears to be a barely perceptible pool of blue that was hung in a window, and another larger work, a grid of squares in mint, yellow, pale blue, and white, also was used as a window covering.

Left an opposite page: Lee Kit, *Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?)*, installation view, 2011. Photo: Kevin Schmidt. Courtesy of the artist and Western Front, Vancouver.



Lee Kit, *Kao Bleach (III)*, 2011, acrylic, emulsion paint, and inkjet ink on acid-free board, 47 x 44 cm. Photo: Kevin Schmidt. Courtesy of the artist and Western Front, Vancouver.



Lee Kit, *Non-ultra Joy (III)*, 2011, acrylic, emulsion paint, inkjet ink on cardboard, 36.5 x 51 cm. Photo: Kevin Schmidt. Courtesy of the artist and Western Front, Vancouver.



Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?) also included a series of new paintings by Lee Kit. The works feature image transfers of logos or brand claims taken from the packaging of cleaning products and other sundry household products. One can see the relationship between washing, cleaning, and the other daily motions related to Lee Kit's cloths and the iconographic focus of these paintings. A hospital-green painting has a patch of Pepto-Bismol pink and a swath of hot pink and features the half-moon logo of Kao bleach and some faded lettering: "Bleaches and Deodorizes for a Hygienic and Clean Kitchen." Another painting is the colour of ivory-toned liquid makeup, and a minty green painting bears the presumably cobbled-together term "non-ultra Joy." A

large lavender painting has a swatch of baby blue and text reading "Glad" and "So You Know When the Bag is Closed."



While the subject matter of these paintings might relate to Pop Art, Lee Kit's handling of the material suggests otherwise. Counter to the slick works that emulate advertising and the mechanics of mass

Lee Kit, *Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?)*, installation view. Photo: Kevin Schmidt. Courtesy of the artist and Western Front, Vancouver.

production, the cardboard surface of Lee Kit's paintings is lumpy, bumpy, and soft. Works are beat up and bruised. The "Glad" painting, for example, was run over by a car, a strip of cardboard dangling loose in evidence, perhaps a reference to a series of Glad commercials where the bags' toughness was established through rigorous and ridiculous testing. These works would thus seem to indicate different relationships with the products they refer to than those engaged by Pop Art. In this context, products read more as familiar elements, notes in a day, and, as with the cloths, ones that bear a life and personality of their own. In situating these materials within the scope of human activity in this way, the artist decommodifies them to a degree.

Lee Kit places special emphasis on the language of advertising. While we know that products that align themselves with "joy," "gladness," and "purity" are designed to mirror our desires back to us, this language is unconsciously absorbed, invisible, although it likely establishes certain feelings and associations. Whether we read these works in this setting as subtle intonations of domestic activity, or, alternatively, paintings Henry might own, this language, or the desires the language corresponds to, is incongruous with the hollow, un-lived life of Lee Kit's Henry.

Lee's development of a narrative space in the exhibition parallels strategies employed by his contemporaries such as Alexandre Singh and Simon Fujiwara, in whose bodies of work objects are compelled to narrate or perform the story. Lee Kit's young practice, however, has consistently included elements of theatre and role-play. His picnics and dinners, for example, involve some measure of staging, and the captions that underline his photos of cloths in use read as performance cues: "Wiping my mouth with hand-painted cloth" or "I am able to tip a cup of tea." Others take on an imperative tone more in line with the language of advertising and branding explored in the paintings: "Why don't you sit down and smoke?" or "One of the many ways to use hand-painted cloth." The use of narrative therefore seems a natural and logical progression for Lee Kit, one in which he can continue to explore the use value of objects from new perspectives and exercise his particular brand of atonal wit.

*Henry (Have You Ever Been So Low?)* quietly explodes a complicated interiority. At the core of Lee Kit's work is an elevated consciousness and a heightened awareness of the physical world. This slowed and hypersensitive experience effects a contemplative space and sustains a somewhat dreamy sense of just now seeing what has been there all along.